Newspapers.com by Ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/877876764

Spotlight: Books

FICTION

The Yiddish Policemen's Union:
A Novel
By Michael Chabon
HarperCollins, 432 pages, $26.95

A fictional state of Israel melts in Alaska

By Emily Simon
News Book Reviewer

For a lover of words and stories — for a reader — it can be difficult to consider Michael Chabon objectively. His legendary pyrotechnic ability with sentences, his commitment to marathon imaginative thinking, and his boundless emotional generosity all make Chabon the literary equivalent of a superstar athlete.

At this point in his career, Chabon is to fiction close to what Michael Jordan was to basketball in the early 90's: he's abundantly gifted and disciplined, almost to the point of unseemliness. And he's so much fun to watch that even his peers are unabashedly willing to call themselves fans. Since the sky is clearly the limit for Chabon, his devoted readers' pleasure now comes in large part from seeing what he'll think of next. "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" certainly doesn't disappoint.

First and foremost, it's ludicrously unclassifiable. Chabon has commented on the fallacy of genre in the past, and if this book weren't so heartfelt it could almost be read as an act of defiance against pigeonholing. "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" is, at minimum, a Jewish mystical historical comic fantasy noir mystery: a completely fictional world, plopped down in our current historical era, populated by an invented culture, featuring the underestimated shlubs and put-upon everymen unfairly overlooked on every street corner since streets began.

Chabon's plot hinges on a high-concept "what if" proposition: what if, instead of creating the state of Israel, Jewish refugees from around the world had been given safe haven in Alaska? This fantasy "what if" is tantalizingly based in real history: FDR entertained such a notion in the early 1940's. As we all know, it was ultimately rejected, but Chabon treats the idea as one option in a child's "Choose Your Own Adventure" book. He grabs the ball and heads out for a triple-double.

In Chabon's alternate reality, the Jews packed up their mufflers and turned Alaska — specifically the fictional district of Sitka —into a temporary city-shetl, staying there for over half a century. As "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" opens, it is the eve of "reversion," when Sitka will return to American rule, and the "frozen chosen" will be sent wandering once more.

From this soulful land of marginalized hard-lucks springs Det. Meyer Landsman, whose last name is a Yiddish word meaning "from the same town" (anyone passingly familiar with Yiddish will have extra fun finding the resonant little moments of wordplay sprinkled through the pages of "The Yiddish Policemen's Union.") Landsman finds a dead body in a shady nook of the fleabag flophouse he's occupied since losing his wife, and as he attempts to find his mysterious neighbor's mysterious killer, he ends up working FOR his ex-wife: the no-nonsense, long-suffering Bina Gelbfish, with whom there is a painful score yet to be settled.

Landsman's pursuit of justice leads him deep into the territory of mobsters, terrorists, dysfunctional families, electric-fenced rehabs, and possible Messiahs. All in a day's work for Semitic Noir Fantasy.

Chabon's lively story splinters itself frequently into elegant, quirky vignettes fresh from his fertile mind, all serving to provide anthropological detail about life in Sitka: the language is half-invented, the customs wholly so, and every dark corner is littered with Tlingits, Nozzes and Filipino Chinese donuts. Chabon acts as tour guide through the exotic terrain of his own rich imagination.

Emotionally, however, Chabon is in familiar territory. His books are always set teetering on the precipice of some kind of an ending: the end of summer, the end of a career, a war, an era, a relationship — and the specter of "reversion" haunting "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" serves this purpose. It's not just the ticking clock driving the action, it's the only environment in which a Chabon character can exist. Outside their native atmosphere of affectionate, yearning melancholy, Chabon's heroes would wither like goldfish who've escaped their bowls.

Michael Chabon: Those who've come to love him would probably read his grocery lists.

The imminence of loss, the persistence of hope and humor at the brink of destruction, and the search for home are all hallmark themes for Chabon. In this way, he's as traditional as Jewish writers come.

As captivating and grand as Chabon's story is, its finer points won't do much to influence the experience of readers with a predisposition to Chabon. Those who've come to love him would probably read his grocery lists (though we're certainly grateful he refrains from publishing them).

Chabon inspires this kind of personal feeling because he's a writer who visibly sweats to make a connection: he is, as Holden Caulfield said of Ring Lardner, someone you wish you could just call up. His heroes and heroines become the same. The core of Chabon's appeal is probably his generosity: he always uses his enormous gifts in the humble service of his whole-hearted desire to entertain. Chabon seems dead-set on giving his readers the kind of experience he himself cherishes having as a reader.

As satisfying as Chabon's latest is, some fans may still secretly hope for him to land back in our atmosphere sometime in the near future. Though Chabon's characters are always perfectly relatable "landsmen," their allegorical environments require readers to take flight anew with each new book. Personally, I sort of miss the days when Chabon was more of a "low-concept" writer. Though "The Mysteries of Pittsburgh," "Wonder Boys," and Chabon's short stories rooted themselves in a primarily "realistic" milieu, he's been breaking the space-time continuum to great success ever since. "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay" won him The Pulitzer Prize with comic book heroes, World War Two and Harry Houdini.

One certainly can't fault an inventive writer for using his imagination, and many readers likely love him for this exact quality.

But as an unabashed fan living in the here and now, I sometimes long to know what kind of stories Chabon could tell using just the raw material of the world we share.

Emily Simon is a freelance writer living in California.

Editor's Choice

God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything by Christopher Hitchens (Twelve Books, 296 pages, $24.99). For those keeping score at home, Christopher Hitchens' most significant recent offenses against the comforts of groupthink are: to declare women incapable of being truly funny; to rend the near-universally presumed saintliness of Mother Theresa in a book called "The Missionary Position;" and to support the war in Iraq with an eloquence and polemic enthusiasm that puts to shame President Bush's paid apologists. Anyone looking for other offenses of lesser neon in countless TV appearances and interviews and Vanity Fair articles could certainly find them by the dozen. Kingsley Amis — whose son Martin is a friend of Hitchens in the more urbane circles of Brit Lit — once famously observed that there's no point in writing unless you can annoy somebody. Hitchens seems to have amended the elder Amis' credo to "there's no point in writing unless you can annoy everybody."

What seems to stand as Hitchens' glorious *summa* of universal annoyance, thus far, is his new book "God is Not Great," an atheist and anti-clericalist's credo that couldn't possibly be better timed, coming as it does hot on the heels of churchly cover-ups of pederasty and fundamentalism attacking Western safety and sensibility in seemingly new ways in every news cycle.

Christopher Hitchens says "religion has run out of justifications."

As a pitiless rationalist and precocious pubescent, Hitchens was struck by "four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos; that because of the original error it manages to combine the maxium of servility with the minimum of solipsism; that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking."

After a couple hundred pages of elucidations, elaborations and digressions of irrepressible erudition, Hitchens declares his faith that faithlessness will find a way and his conviction that a New Englightenment is needed for common agreement that "religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important."

The secret of Hitchens' charismatic shock tactics is that his essential geniality and generosity always prevail in the end, along with his wit and Oxonian mastery of the English sentence (he once lost a girl to Bill Clinton at Oxford, until they both lost her, according to him, to same sex romance.)

He can't really refute the old credo attributed to Tertullian — "I believe because it is absurd" — but he's enough of an ironist himself to know that unbelief has few more appealing apostles.

• • •

Beats, Rhymes and Life: *What We Love and Hate About Hip-Hop* edited by Kenji Jasper and Ytasha Womack (Harlem Moon/Broadway, 307 pages, $14 paper); **The Boy Who Cried Freebird:** *Rock and Roll Fables and Sonic Storytelling* by Mitch Myers (HarperCollins, 322 pages, $25.95). While this may not be the second Golden Age of Rock Criticism (the first arrived screaming with Richard Meltzer, Lester Bangs and Co.), things are looking a little yellow again. The subtitle of "Beats, Rhymes and Life" is "what we love and hate about hiphop" and features interviews with Nelly, Mos Def, Ludacris, Ice-T, Common, Scarface, and Heather Hunter along with contributions from all manner of compelling young writers.

Mitch Myers, meanwhile, has figured out a way to combine fiction and rock and pop journalism in a way that is distinctive and charming and sometimes powerful enough to add something very new to what everybody else might have to say about Phil Spector, Lou Reed, Sonic Youth, Black Sabbath, Bono, Aretha Franklin and, yes Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington, Terry Riley and Albert Ayler (especially the latter, about whom Myers' piece is one of the best.)

— Jeff Simon

Albert Ayler is one of Mitch Myers' essay subjects.

Best Sellers

Hardcover

FICTION

Mary Higgins Clark weaves a tale of whirlwind courtship and murder.

1. **Simple Genius** by David Baldacci (Warner, $26.95). Political thriller in which two Secret Service agents reach a crisis in their realtionship.
2. **The Children of Hurin by J.R.R. Tolkien** (Houghton Mifflin, $25). The first complete book by Tolkien in three decades, this tale of Middle-earth is presented for the first time as a stand-alone story, painstakingly pieced together by the author's son, Christopher.
3. **The Woods** by Harlan Coben (Dutton, $26.95). A county prosecutor is forced to relive the day that destroyed his innocence.
4. **The Good Husband of Zebra Drive** by Alexander McCall Smith (Pantheon, $21.95). Eighth installment of the No. 1 Ladies Detective mystery series.
5. **Body Surfing** by Anita Shreve (Little, Brown, $25.99). Dark tale of deceptive love and betrayal set on the oceanfront of New Hampshire.
6. **I Heard That Song Before** by Mary Higgins Clark (Simon & Schuster, $25.95). Suspenseful tale of a whirlwind courtship and unsolved murder.
7. **Nineteen Minutes** by Jodi Picoult (Atria, $26.95). Thriller about a bullied, alienated teen.
8. **Back on Blossom Street** by Debbie Macomber (Mira, $24.95). Women who share a love of knitting support each other through the vicissitudes of life in Seattle.
9. **Fresh Disasters** by Stuart Woods (Putnam, $25.95). Suave attorney Stone Barrington takes on organized crime.
10. **The River Knows** by Amanda Quick (Putnam, $24.95). An unlikely pair seek to uncover the crooked secrets of wealthy Elwin Hastings.

NONFICTION

Russell Simmons shares secrets of success.

1. **The Secret** by Rhonda Byrne (Atria/Beyond Words, $23.95) Inspirational book about personal transformation.
2. **Einstein** by Walter Isaacson (Simon & Schuster, $32). Acclaimed biographer Isaacson examines the life of "science's preeminent poster boy."
3. **Where Have All the Leaders Gone?** by Lee Iacocca (Scribner, $25). The former president of Ford and Chrysler sounds off against the sad state of leadership in America today, urging more young people to vote.
4. **The Loved Dog** by Tamar Geller with Andrea Cagan (Simon Spotlight Entertainment, $24.95). Geller illuminates a pathway beyond punishment for dog training in the 21st century.
5. **Do You!** by Russell Simmons with Chris Morrow (Gotham, $25). The CEO of Hip Hop shares 12 steps to success.
6. **The Weight Loss Cure "They" Don't Want You to Know About** by Kevin Trudeau (Alliance Publishing, $24.95). A weight-loss method introduced by a British doctor but not endorsed by the American Medical Association.
7. **A Long Way Gone** by Ishmael Beah (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $22). The author's first-person account of his abduction into the horrors of civil warfare in Sierra Leone as a child soldier and subsequent journey to the United States.
8. **Paula Deen: It Ain't All about the Cookin'** by Paula Deen with Sherry Suib Cohen (Simon & Schuster, $25). The television show host pairs new recipes with her down-home life story.
9. **Women and Money: Owning the Power to Control Your Destiny** by Suze Orman (Spiegel & Grau, $24.95). The author addresses the complicated, often dysfunctional relationship women have with personal finance.
10. **Everyday Pasta** by Giada De Laurentiis (Clarkson Potter, $32.50). More than 100 new pasta recipes as well as side dishes, salads and appetizers to go with them.

Literary Notes

Join **Johanna Fisher and Dorothy Smith** from 2 to 3 p.m. Thursday as they will present a poetry reading and book signing of "Time Space Home and Place," in the Barnes & Noble located in the Student Union of Buffalo State College, 1300 Elmwood Ave.

• • •

Just Buffalo Literary Center presents the "Leaders Read" from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Monday. Part of the Big Read, the event features a leadership dialogue and social with Latricia Chisholm, Robert Gioia, John R. Oishei, Mary Gresham and others. The read takes place in WNED studios, 140 Lower Terrace. For a complete list of Big Read events, call 832-5400 or visit www.justbuffalo.org.

FICTION

Good grief, Charlie Brown! More of a good thing

By Bob Stilson
News Book Reviewer

The Complete Peanuts
1963-1964
By Charles M. Schulz
Fantagraphics Books
326 pages, $28.95

Do you think you know your "Peanuts"?

You say you're a huge fan of the round-headed kid in the striped shirt and the little philosopher with the blue security blanket? You say you've read every paperback collection of the strip over the years and you know the strip inside and out? Well, think again.

"The Complete Peanuts 1963 — 1964", Fantagraphics' latest collection of strips by Charles M. Schulz, contains a great many stories that are familiar to longtime fans. We see Charlie Brown's bout with "little leaguer's elbow," Linus battling over his blanket with both Snoopy and his blanket-hating Grandma, Lucy showing Charlie Brown his faults in a slideshow presentation, Linus patiently waiting for the Great Pumpkin on Halloween, and Charlie Brown suffering the pangs of unrequited love for the little red-haired girl.

But Schulz was quite selective when it came to choosing the strips for past collections. While there are a total of 730 strips in this collection, over 150 of them haven't been seen since they originally ran in papers over forty years ago. We see Snoopy become ill and spend an extended stay at a veterinarian hospital. We see a new groups of kids move into the neighborhood whose parents have given them numbers for names (the oldest boy is named 5; his sisters are named 3 and 4). We see Linus almost win his bid for school president (a certain speech on the merits of the "Great Pumpkin" causes a little trouble) and we see that Snoopy was quite friendly with bunnies before taking up with a little bird named Woodstock.

The foreword is written by Bill Melendez, the man responsible for producing 50 TV specials and four feature films featuring the "Peanuts" characters. In the year following these collected strips, Schulz and Melendez made the exquisite "Charlie Brown Christmas" and everything exploded for Schulz. These simple, sweet, cartoon characters became worldwide sensations. Schulz's time was now divided between the multi-million dollar business of merchandising, publishing, and the constant demands of creating new television "product."

Schulz would continue to do the daily strip for another 35 years, but I feel these mid-sixties strips represent his creative peak. These were the days when the world of Charlie Brown consisted of nothing more than a gentle man from Minnesota sitting at a drawing table imagining little adventures for a boy who loved baseball and a beagle who liked to sleep on top of his doghouse.

Bob Stilson is a cartoonist and a local radio personality.

FINAL

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com